

*Fr. Anthony is away walking the ancient pilgrimage route of the Camino in Spain.*

*Below is his second report of his journeys.*

### **Step by Step along The Way (Week 2)**

We were travelling on the day of the French Presidential election (last Sunday). It was sobering to see armed military personnel patrol the busy transit station of Montparnasse. The sight of soldiers armed with rapid fire weapons didn't make me feel any safer, but the French are probably more used to such things. The elections were held, relatively trouble free – only the odd protest here and there – with a run-off election to be held between the two leading candidates next week. It is being described as a contest between an “open and optimistic” France, and a “fearful, pessimistic” France. Perhaps much of French history can be described that way.

A group of ten started the Camino trek on Friday. The group will grow to twelve when my sister and brother-in-law join us along the track. In this past week, we travelled to Chartres, then onto Bordeaux, through Lourdes and onto our starting line for the Camino in the Pyrenees. Chartres Cathedral was a magnificent experience. Its luminous stained-glass is matched by the medieval sculptures in the nave of the church. The detail, depicting ordinary things such as sowing, baking, and carpentry, must surely have elevated the medieval mind out of the worldly mundane and towards a sense of enchantment with divine goodness.

An unexpected gift was the civic celebration of *Chartres en Illuminat*e. Public buildings around the city were lit-up with colourful displays of light and movement – a modern, digitised take on stained glass windows art of story-telling. The Cathedral display was truly remarkable and impossible to describe. However, my amateur time lapse slideshow can be seen on our parish website.

On Anzac Day, we travelled to Lourdes. Places of sacred pilgrimage are common to all religious traditions, particularly sites associated with healing. Lourdes is the second highest tourist destination in France, after Paris, and one that holds a particularly important place in the Catholic imagination. I didn't know what to expect, but I certainly didn't expect my dodgy ankle and elbow to be restored to their original splendour (I'll let you know how that goes). Places of healing are so appealing to human spirit because we all seek remedy from all sorts of spiritual, emotional, physical, mental and personal ailments. Yes, miracles transform; but most miraculous occurrences are gradual, unhurried and can appear to be quite natural in the course of things. That we can experience an un-disappointed hope that God can re-make what is worst in us, what is damaged in us, into what is best in us, and into what is strength in us, is the deepest and truest of all miracles. Places such as Lourdes are simply earthy reminders of what God can do anywhere and everywhere, any time and all the time. I lit a candle and prayed for the whole parish while I was there, especially our sick and frail.

As with all shrines, there were a few “OMG” moments (“Oh, my gurdy!” – in both the English and French meaning of the word), but there is something about the nature of popular piety that gives Lourdes a three dimensional sense. The sick, frail, elderly, and incapacitated were given privileged access by the many volunteers who minister at Lourdes. Is this what the public ministry of Christ looked like? (E.g. Matthew 14:35-36: “*After the people of that place recognised him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*”) Is there too much human aggrandisement cluttering this little spring of hope and trust in divine healing? Perhaps, but our gaze, at Lourdes, and everywhere else for that matter, needs to be directed towards the healing ministry of Christ. His are the waters of new life and re-birth. A true Catholic faith presents Mary, not as some kind of divine substitute, but as a both a pathway and fellow traveller towards the God of Jesus Christ. Early this year, Pope Francis said of Mary: “The true Virgin Mary is not the Virgin of a post office that every day sends a different letter, saying: ‘My children, you do this and then, tomorrow, you do something else.’ This fashion of the Virgin Mary superstar, (who) puts herself at the centre, isn't Catholic.” A handy reminder when stepping into the flowing waters of popular devotion and piety, be it Lourdes or anywhere else. For now, however, onwards towards the Pyrenees.

*Fr Anthony*